

# Michigan Teacher of the Year 2002-2003



**Susan L. Gutierrez**  
**Forest Hills Central Middle School**  
**7/8 Grade History**

"Good teachers are everywhere today! To me, teaching is by far one of the most honorable of all professions. Each day I work to capture my heart and wisdom in my teaching style. I respect and honor students knowing that they are often our greatest teacher. At the foundation of my teaching is a belief that each child is unique and that the primary purpose of education should be to meet students' individual needs. My role, as teacher, should foster the development of each student toward his or her fullest potential. At the middle level, this means addressing students as whole persons by fostering their physical, emotional, cognitive, moral and social development. My lessons work to draw upon students' experiences, concerns, and interests.

I believe my real strength working with students lies in my ability to build relationships and challenge the limits students have set for themselves. Within my classroom, students of all abilities quickly understand they possess valuable talents. It is my belief that in social studies, appropriate learning takes place through problem-solving projects by which the student is led from practical issues to theoretical principles, and a greater understanding of the social studies. If we truly believe in helping all individuals excel, then formal education must allow for individual differences.

Growing up in the Grand Rapids area, I was inspired to teach after working with a non-swimmer while a counselor at Camp Newaygo. One young camper, in particular, put forward her best efforts daily despite her fear of drowning. Two weeks later this non-swimmer dove into deep water and altered my life. She taught me a valuable lesson on that cold day: far too many kids are never given the opportunity or the environment to succeed, nor the caring adults to help them achieve their goals. This lesson has carried with me over my 9 years of teaching and influences my basic teaching philosophy."

Parents and colleagues describe Sue as an innovative, spirited teacher who inspires and leads both students and staff. Her collaborative spirit, willingness to work hard and sensitivity to others have operated at the heart of her work. She possesses the hallmarks of an exceptional educator: extensive professional knowledge, instructional talent, the ability to work cooperatively, and a deep understanding and love of students. As a middle school team leader, Sue has worked to develop exemplary teams. Team names, slogans, parent-teacher communication, conferences, and interdisciplinary units all build upon the “spirit” of the team and build the learner’s eagerness to participate in the academic environment. She describes herself as a ready learner and truly captures the spirit and professionalism exemplified by the best teachers in public schools today.

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